

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping



Turning Office Spaces Into Greener Places

The modern office is generally a product of strict efficiency and economic design. Lines are straight, wall-coverings are bland, windows are sealed shut, lights fluorescent, and cubicles ubiquitous. And this is where many of us spend the better part of our lives. Oh brave new world! Perhaps it's time to consider personalizing — and naturalizing — these uninviting spaces. And the best place to start might be with a favorite houseplant brought from home.

It's amazing what a welcome addition a plant can be in the workplace. It may appear as nothing more than a simple little living thing, and yet, perched amid the photocopied reports, yellow sticky notes, and tangled telephone cords, it has the power to transform even the most cluttered of desktops into something uniquely you — *and special*.

Even if you have only one African violet by your elbow, it might be enough to distract you from your spreadsheet for a few moments to examine whether a new round of flowering buds is forming. Perhaps an office mate will wander over to ask you how often you feed your plant — or where you got it. In a sterile environment, that humble plant is an oasis of life. Your spreadsheet can wait.

And if one plant can work such wonders, what about an office-full of them? Truly, plants enhance the modern office in ways that most people can barely imagine.

Aesthetically, plants add color and texture to almost any space, however plain. Taller plants or groupings of larger plants become living architecture to help direct foot traffic, soften harsh corners, create privacy in seating areas, or add verticality in an unending sea of cubicles. Hanging or elevated planters create a sense of movement when filled with hanging grape ivy or trailing philodendron vines.

Using similar plants throughout a larger space can also provide a unifying or cohesive element, tying and blending together a disparate array of desks, copying machines, doorways, cabinets, and partitions. The final impression is calming and ordered, rather than chaotic.

Plants function as eye-catching focal points, or discretely mute or camouflage unattractive features. Above all, they add a sense of vitality to an interior landscape of metal, machines, and soul-crushing cubicles, even if the padded walls are finished in soft pastels.



Plants also play a substantial role in promoting physical and psychological health. Clinical studies in Britain and Northern Europe have shown that plants in the workplace reduce stress levels and fatigue by more than 30 percent, along with the symptoms associated with colds and flu, such as coughing and sore throats. Not bad for a cheery-looking space adorned with spider plants, dangling pothos vines, and weeping figs!

These green allies can also promote good health by cleaning a host of potentially dangerous pollutants from indoor air. All of those veneer-and-laminate bookcases, formica-clad desks, glued-down carpets, painted walls, and PVC-filled computers, printers, and fax machines are releasing, or off-gassing, a variety of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), including formaldehyde. Other synthetic toxins might also be present, depending on the individual building, air circulation, and type of work undertaken. All-in-all, it's a nasty stew of bad air, generally trapped — along with you — in a closed loop ventilation system.

Fortunately, there's Mother-in-law's tongue. I don't mean my mother-in-law, Melva, who's also very helpful and health-conscious, but the plant, also known as snake plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*). This popular and sturdy plant grows elegantly tall, and sometimes flowers, even in low-light, and it is an absolute whiz at snatching pollutants from the air.

But the varied, and often variegated, species of the *Sansevieria* are not alone in this ability. NASA studies in

the late 1970s identified a large number of common indoor plants capable of filtering VOCs from the air (see the GreenMan Factsheet: "Greening and Cleaning Your Indoor Air"). They range from aloe vera, which needs bright light, but is easy to divide and share with office mates — and serves as a nifty balm for paper-cut fingers — to magenta-striped dracaena, peace lily, and golden pothos, perhaps the toughest indoor plant around.

Simply put, most of the plants best suited to indoor gardening can help clean indoor air. Moreover, ongoing studies show that plants clean the air not only through the stomata or microscopic pores on the leaf surface, much like the filters in home furnaces and HVAC systems, but also through the action of bacteria in the potting soil, which normally make nutrients available for the plant's root system.

In controlled environments, the soil microorganisms were capable of removing and absorbing up to 20 percent of the air contaminants. Together with the plants themselves, these invisible colonies represent an indoor living system functioning much like the trees, grasses, and algae found outdoors.

But the real value of introducing plants probably goes deeper than stress-busting, filtration, and décor. In a world that keeps us indoors far-too-long, bringing a bit of the outdoors inside keeps us connected with a larger living world. And beyond the momentary distraction of looking at a salmon-budded kalanchoe or blooming bromeliad,

the plants also require watering, feeding, and care. They require a time apart from the routine of databases and spam-deletion — a time to actually nurture another living thing. Surely that's a simple enough bit of therapy.

And what about the human connection? In a world of passwords and name badges, your plant is a bridge to fellow workers. Perhaps you might root some cuttings for them, or share the decades-old history of your mother's braided willow-leaf ficus, now thriving by your window. Each year I wait to hear about how my wife's towering corn plant sends out a syrupy sweet siren-call to everyone in her department as it begins a week-long ritual of aromatic blooming.

Your office plant can stretch forth your personality, invite a much-needed compliment, and allow you to share and connect with others. It shows, as Shakespeare noted, that "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

Great Greens for Indoor Spaces

Screening/Bold Accent:

- Bamboo Palm
- Cast Iron Plant
- Corn Plant
- Rubber Plant
- Weeping Fig (*Ficus benjamina*)
- Willow-leaf Ficus (*F. nerifolia/salicifolia*)

Ledges, Baskets, & Cubicle Containers

- English and Grape Ivy
- Hoya
- Golden Pothos and Philodendron
- Spider Plants
- Boston Fern
- Radiator Plant (*Peperomia rotundifolia*)



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